



BEDFORD

**The Politics of Place: a Meditation of
Home**

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Artist Statement:

Bedford is a series of paintings meditating on my experience growing up in Tennessee. To be a Southerner is to be piecemeal. You grow up often discouraged from sharing feelings but encouraged to experience similar truths to those around you. It's not talk that's important, it's actions and their consequences. All stories, including your own, rely on each other. Bonded together, every moment of your life forms a tangled mass of roots and connections.

Trees are the quiet watchers of my family's story. They've outlasted any one member of my family, and they will outlast me. I've climbed every tree I've painted. This series captures the slight swaying vertigo of home through glimpses of the past partially obscured by tree branches.

Problem statement:

This series of oil paintings that chronicles my family's Tennessee history in close relation to a rapidly changing American South. This series pulls from family photographs, locations and stories, and uses these artifacts to create a quilted representation of growing up in Tennessee. These portraits of place will emphasize the individual and idiosyncratic nature of the region and its people. These paintings cradle my childhood as it was, a collision of values, aspirations and history.

This project is a meditation on the South as a region in flux, through the people who call it home.

Context Personal: Why Home; Why Now?

My father would take my two brothers and me driving around Nashville, our hometown, in our old beat up Honda van, with damaged worn seats and a perpetual frost of dog hair on the floor. We'd look out the window until the sun submerged, pulled under the grasping arms of pine trees. Dad would peer into this deep green paradise and tell us stories about our family. These drives were often fought hard against, my father ignoring the campaign we leveled against him, claiming better things to do. But, once defeated, exhausted from our protest, we would sink deeply into our seats, and he could finally get a word in with us. The legends of the Coopers would fill the car for hours on end, tragedies and triumphs; a never ending spring of stories which would have been all too easily forgotten if not for my father. We would take the drive to Shelbyville, and see the land my family has occupied for more than 100 years, the horse stables,

the old dilapidated houses, the past. Most of this at the time fell on deaf ears; the annoyance first felt at being made to go, turning into an ignorance of our space. It wasn't until I left home that I missed it.

To be a Southerner is to be piecemeal. I grew up often discouraged from sharing feelings, but encouraged to experience similar truths to those around me. It's not talk that's important, it's actions, and their consequences. All stories, yours included, rely on each other. Once bonded together, every moment of your life forms a tangled mass of roots and connections. This spiraling network defines how I look at the world, and the course of this project.

I was already working through these ideas at stamps when dramatic events sharpened the urgency of this exploration.

On Christmas morning 2020, a 63 year old man drove an RV packed with explosives into the heart of downtown Nashville. While speakers on the van blared Petula Clarke, the man detonated the bomb, destroying himself and heavily damaging 6 blocks of my hometown. This violent attack cast an especially harsh light on three cultural threads I have observed growing up in the South: the Code of the masculine, the drive to stand out, and the thirst for a pageant.

That morning, sitting underneath the Christmas tree, frantically checking and rechecking the news, was the first time I thought about my home, on my own. I found myself feeling numb, settling into grief, as I thought about everything my father had told me, or the pieces I could remember. My family had seen a great many things in their day, but no tale came close to threatening my home like this had. The anger subsided, as I lost myself in childhood memories. As if all at once, I felt the part of home my father tried so hard to plant and nurture, grow.

Growth is never easy, Michigan Winters were a harsh environment for this budding homeseed. I had struggled previously to tell anyone where I came from before, worried that a

reputation would precede me that I could not compensate for. Returning into the cold, I found myself too entranced to care anymore. Home spilled over the edges of my canvases, and followed me back to my apartment in the stains left on my hands. Home remained under my fingernails and journeyed with me as a passenger everywhere I went. Finally, home had a foothold in my work, its roots growing and fastening to my images, a topiary of history, with the strength of a sycamore tree.

CONTEXT: Historical

Place Politics

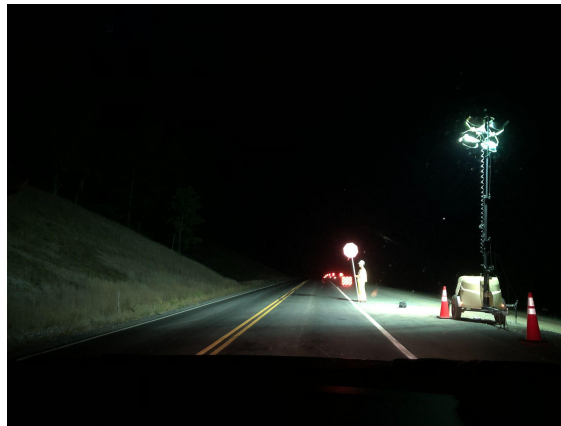
It was two in the morning. My family, all 5 of us, crammed into a minivan, sped towards Warms Springs Virginia, my Mother's home. We were a comet of light and noise in an otherwise bleak Blue Ridge Mountain night. The country road bucked and kicked at the van, sharp turns coming out of nowhere. This rollercoaster road narrowed and straightened giving us a first real view of what was ahead of us in the nothingness of the early morning. A single light pierced the darkness of the road ahead, a beacon in the middle of the night. I remember squinting out the front window as we approached, getting glimpses of orange, high-vis yellow, and the red of a stop sign. I blinked my eyes and began to recognize the image of a man holding a stop sign. He stood under the jellyfish-like glow of a portable streetlight. We slowly came to a stop, and waited nearly hypnotized for the man to wave us forward.

In that moment I remember feeling like I could have been anywhere. It was so dark that outside of his island of light everything else dissolved into oblivion. He existed to us as we did to him, intensely local, and passing in the night. I found myself a little ashamed. I had grown up making this drive, even this late at night I should have known where I was. I knew generally I was in the South, the temperature reminded me of that, the air in the car sticking to the back of

my neck despite the efforts of the air conditioning. I stared at the man with the sign. I wondered which small mountain town he would go home to, what life he led beyond this silent sentry post.

We waited and waited. The silence brought daydreams of small towns, churches and dilapidated farms. I was imagining a home for this man, blocking in his story. I fantasized about stepping out of the car and asking him, demanding his county, his home. I couldn't picture him going to any of the generic gas stations and restaurants we had seen earlier that day, in the 8 hour drive from Nashville. No, homogeny did not fit the slightly slumped person in front of us. He was a specific individual. The soul of the south is a very specific man belonging to a very specific place

Suddenly the man shifted, the sign on his shoulder flipping from STOP to CAUTION. He beckoned us on, standing straight, tipping his hard hat. Then we were gone.



I want to understand why my impulse as a Southerner was to ask myself where he was from. Why is location so important as an identifying concept. The writer William Faulkner understood this impulse to such a degree that he created *Yoknapatawpha County*¹, a fictionalized version of Mississippi to give all his stories the same sense of place that the South as a whole feels. With this example in mind I found myself diving back into Southern Literature looking for

¹ Hoffman, Frederick J. 1961. *William Faulkner*.

ways to answer the question, Why does location mean so much? How does place play a part in our lives? What is the South's relationship to the land? I found the answer in the ground itself.

Land as Character

Land is personified throughout Southern literature, both fiction and nonfiction. Growing up I learned that people often look at the ground as much as a character in their lives as the people around them. I remember being taught important places in the same breath as the people who were there first. River deltas and woods became almost personified, background characters to the human story. I wanted to know if this extended outside of my own childhood in Tennessee, in a real tactile way. I ended up landing on a book: *Rising Tides* by Barry Allen.

Rising Tides is a non fiction work that chronicles the development of the Mississippi river delta through the men who attempted to control it. A story of blind ambition and greed, the novel recounts consistent bureaucratic ineptitude and insider dealing which led to the destruction of a sizable portion of the Mississippi river delta with the flood in 1927². Barry tells the story of the river through two men, James Eads, and Edward Humphrey. These two men were responsible for the taming of the river, and bringing wealth to a new city: New Orleans. James Eads was a civilian engineer, placed by the government against the military titan of Edward Humphrey. Both men ended up vying for the government contract to widen and deepen the river, and what began as a scientific discourse quickly got out of hand, being cited as “one of the worst mannered contests of the American south³”. Barry’s recounting emphasizes just how much the question of dominating the river held the delta region and the people who lived there. In the end

² Barry, John M. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

³ Powell, Lawrence N. 2012. *The accidental city: improvising New Orleans*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

neither of them were right, and in 1927 the Mississippi river flooded, almost completely destroying the land of the river delta and displacing almost half a million Americans. The following election year Hoover was elected president and hailed as a hero for his aid in reclaiming the delta from the river.

This book illustrates a core pillar of southern values. The land under our feet is not ours to keep, so our relationship gathers a mutual respect and responsibility over time. The South as a region is as much a character throughout *Rising Tides* as the men who seek to conquer it. The river constantly frustrates the men's attempts to dredge and widen it, and whatever attempts are made to control it eventually come crashing down around Eads, and Humphrey.

This concept of the region as an active participant in life became a lens to re-examine my own childhood. While not so grand as taming a river, the concept that these men are at the will of where they are from mirrors how I feel about my own position. I'm reminded of the song Muddy Waters by Johnny Cash, which he sings about land lost to a rising river. The song is a great example of this awareness that people are guests on the land. His lyric: "Well, the morning light showed water in the valley/ Daddy's grave just went below the line/ Things they say you just can't take 'em with you/ The flood will swallow all you leave behind"⁴. For Cash, the river is just as likely to take his house away as a bank or another man, it's his equal in more ways than one.

⁴ Johnny Cash, Phil Rosenthal, Silver, Columbia records. Track 7.1979

Land as Escape

Southern Depictions of land can stretch beyond the adversarial. Faulkner throughout his writing used land and location as a distraction from larger human dysfunction. His tales from *Yoknapatawpha County* are all drenched in human misery, and misbehavior, oftentimes the land itself becoming the protagonist, healing from human inflicted wounds.

As I Lay Dying is a book that is all about the land, especially as an escape. The story revolves around the Bundren Family as they take their Dead mother to be buried in her hometown, her final wish. Told through separate perspectives, the goal of getting a body from their farm home to Jefferson to be buried becomes harder and harder as the family, without their mother, falls apart. As we hear each family member's individual problems the only constant throughout the story is the land around them, as they traverse rivers and farmsteads. Darl, the oldest of the bundren children says, "Life was created in the valleys. It blew up onto the hills on the old yours, the old lusts, the old despairs. That's why you must walk up the hills so you can ride down."⁵ Faulkner here deliberately makes these hills a way forward through the troubles of the family, both surrounding and carrying. The bundrens are supported by the ground, and tested by it. Not only this but the concept of giving their mother back into the ground gives is the famous phrase "My mother is a fish"⁶ in which the youngest child of the bundrens is so distraught at placing his mother physically in the ground that he decides she must have never been human at all, and is instead something with a greater relationship to the earth.

Faulkner's stories themselves are exaggerations of the truth, fiction meant to be a lesson, but the relationship to the land his characters feel is mirrored in how I grew up. It's a focus I have not been able to find anywhere else.

⁵ Faulkner, William. 1900. *As I Lay Dying*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

⁶ Faulkner, William. 1900. *As I Lay Dying*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

As I found myself delving back into the literature of growing up I quickly found myself at odds with the concoction of values that are Hollywood westerns, with the principle example being the “Good the Bad and the Ugly.” The cowboy genre as a whole is one of the widest accepted American mediums, but fundamentally the version we know is fantasy. White-hatted protagonists following groups of bandits never happened, at least the way this movie would have you believe. Somehow however this idea of the cowboy, the horse and man combination of living on the land took complete hold of the American South.⁷ I would argue it's because it's the most romantic version of the Southern attitude toward the earth. Small pop up towns and islands of people held together simply by the proximity to each other, and an inability to move away. The wandering figure of the cowboy, the outlaw suggests freedom, but at the cost of specific locality for a regional identity, the “west” is a look at america as a whole, left alone from modernization and development. It's still a principal part of the way Southern men are encouraged to look at themselves- bull riding, nomadic, but at total peace with the land. Cowboy films in general use land as a vehicle for moving the story physically, as well as the occasional escape for the protagonist. Fresh air clears your head.

Land Reality

Having looked at this long rich literary history of land, I found myself wondering where it had gone. When driving to Virginia you can still find pockets of this romantic version of land, but for the most part it's highways, fast food, and gas stations, places you can find in any of the lower 48 states. The rise of the fast food chain in the 1960's killed the draw of local restaurants⁸.

⁷ Knowlton, Christopher. 2017. *Cattle Kingdom: The Hidden History of the Cowboy West*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

⁸ Standage, Tom. 2009. *An edible history of humanity*. New York: Walker & Co.

I remember watching growing up as diners in Staunton were replaced by McDonalds and Red Lobsters.

I found myself both terrified of this new “could be anywhere” attitude the highway presents. I delved into the history of our concrete hydra. Put in place by Eisenhower in 1956⁹ highways for America were a product of a new and burgeoning motor economy. Like the internet now, highways have become the principal pathways for people to move and communicate in America. It was also used as a tool for destruction. City councils, Nashville’s included, armed with the weapon of the highway used them to control land values in cities and towns, as well as destroying whole townships, simply because they weren't considered for the highway, Like the Mississippi river, we start to see America organizing around this new transportation goldmine, and with this change comes the death of the small town in America. We see the urbanization from the northwest coming to the South in the 1950’s right alongside the highway. The increased demand for efficient housing and energy forced the damming of rivers by the TVA and the removal of the country road as a primary means of travel.

Urbanization has the benefit of bringing people closer together, and it absolutely did, but in its weak comes a trail of abandoned gas stations, and diners that can be found even five minutes off any given highway. America as a region has spent its land instead of protecting it, and with that change in focus came a dramatic change in that was important, the first thing to go being the land itself.

⁹ Eric Avela, 2014 Folklore of the Freeway New York Walker and Co.

DISCUSSION-Research

A person's relationship to land is an important part of being human. The Southern tradition of land awareness is one of the prides of our literary and artistic history. I have found however, that more and more of this tradition is lost, the more we ignore the outside, or the spaces off our beaten paths. The highway for America represents a new unawareness with the world around you, which creates a world of people without a real regional connection to the world. I thought, throughout this process I would be affirmed in the hidden history of the world I grew up in, and that history is there, but it stopped. Our view of the world does not really include it anymore. Barry Allen and Faulkner together bring an incredible awareness of the world around us to the form of important human stories. Barry in particular paints a portrait of 1800's America and just how interested everyone was in taming and understanding the rivers, and forests around them. I think now is the time to re-imagine that relationship, and return to the small town. I think I found some of myself hiding there. I want my work moving forward to relish this connection, and bring a new life and attention to the ground under our feet, a break from the concrete.

CONCLUSION-Research:

I still want to know more about the man on the road. Making the effort to retrace our past into the land we live on is an important way to figure out who we are. I know the question of relationship to land is intensely individual. But throughout my research I've found it often is a great connector, becoming a shared identity, supporting a network, and growing people to the best versions of themselves. You can't find that level of character on the interstate. This research has cemented for me just how much of a challenge this is going to be for my generation moving

forward. Bringing ground into my work is a way to preserve what we have, for the future to learn from.

CONTEXT-Artistic:



This monumental proposal of a land relationship quickly became a beacon for my work. I quickly found myself encapsulated by the painting “Gas” by Edward Hopper. The painting cements itself in the tradition of American Regionalism, a tradition I now embrace. Hopper, throughout his work delves into the

idea that Americans are intensely products of their own microcosms, chiefly controlled by environment or region. “Gas” itself is realistic in color, and simple in description. Similar to “Nighthawks” it captures a moment in time, nothing more at least on the surface. The portrait of an elderly man checking his intensely local gas station emulates for me how I look at my own childhood. The small town flavor of this description comes from its intense stillness, and quiet, almost threateningly so. There is no traffic on the road, the man is alone, his only company in the dark is his island of artificial light.

The design of the station itself is nostalgic. From my father’s own time growing up in Tennessee, the intense locality of Hopper’s station is absolutely a goal of my work. To describe the South as it was to my dad, is to describe the death throes of the local. American homogeneity challenges the locality of the south. I find myself throughout this research, mourning and remembering the American South found in the small town, and out in the country. Hopper's work changed for me from a contemporary portrait to a vivid dream of the past, filled with all the

romance of a fantasy novel, a love letter of sorts. Hopper as well focuses on the idea of illusion and mistruth, a central focus of small town america. To appear busier, larger and more imposing than your population to Americans became the engine for homogeneity, and is extremely dangerous to those swept along behind it. I looked at this work and got lost in the mythology of my home, a cataclysmic violent and beautiful myth, furthered by a constant belief and renaissance of those people who call the south home. I claim my period from this work, following in the footsteps of the broken smaller American Dream.



Building off of Hopper led me back to one of my favorite paintings of all time, Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth. It features a woman in a field, looking back at a house at the end of a field. The woman herself looks like she's been there for a while, called back to the

home or waking up suddenly, realizing there's something she left behind. The painting is in local color, with a green field and the woman and the house in white, popping forward from the background. This work creates a heavy sense of motion and urgency as well as showing in a way the haunting sedating lullaby of the field. The woman isn't just waking up, it's like the spell of the land has been broken, even for a moment.

This work cements for me some of the magic I find from home, despite having run from my upbringing most of my life, I find myself re-immersed in this field, home. This notion, a deep sense of home is this deeply seductive entity that swallows you up, whether you like it or not.

Christina's World is this moment of clarity, a realization of the comfort of home, as well as an awareness of how much of a trap it can be, which is exactly the character I want for my work moving forward.

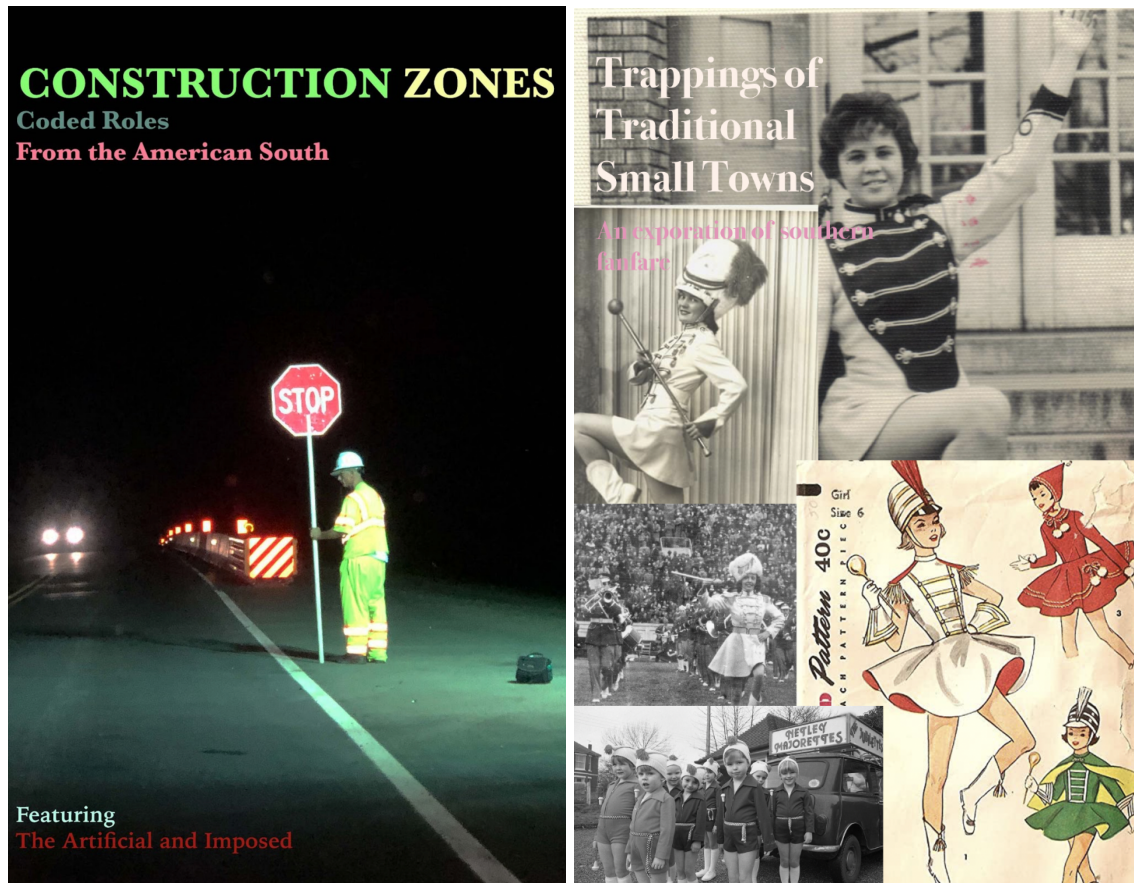
Context Artistic Conclusion:

The history of American oil painters helped me to craft an understanding of the conversation I walked into. Helpless, romantic and often somber, these artists helped me grasp a real understanding of the emotional depth needed to speak on the idea of place. Wyeth proves in Christina's World just how much emotion a field can convey, while Hopper hides in the quiet twilight of microcosms of human experience. Both of these would be important moving forward. These two along with Jennifer Bartlett's physical treatment of paint and Max Ernst's vibrant colors helped me distill a visual language to begin to make my own entry into this wonderful world.

PROCESS:

This project was a spiral from the very beginning. From a starting point of protecting myself from the inquiry, to where it ended, a portrait of growing up exactly as it happened. I have tried to put into words this crazy contorted gnarled path of self exploration, but I find it more appropriate to show this process through the images themselves:

I began with two central ideas- none of which lasted very long, a description of the masculine and an examination of the feminine parts of the South I had grown up in:



Both of these movements had been purchased in previous work, but I wanted this to be more personal, more complete somehow.

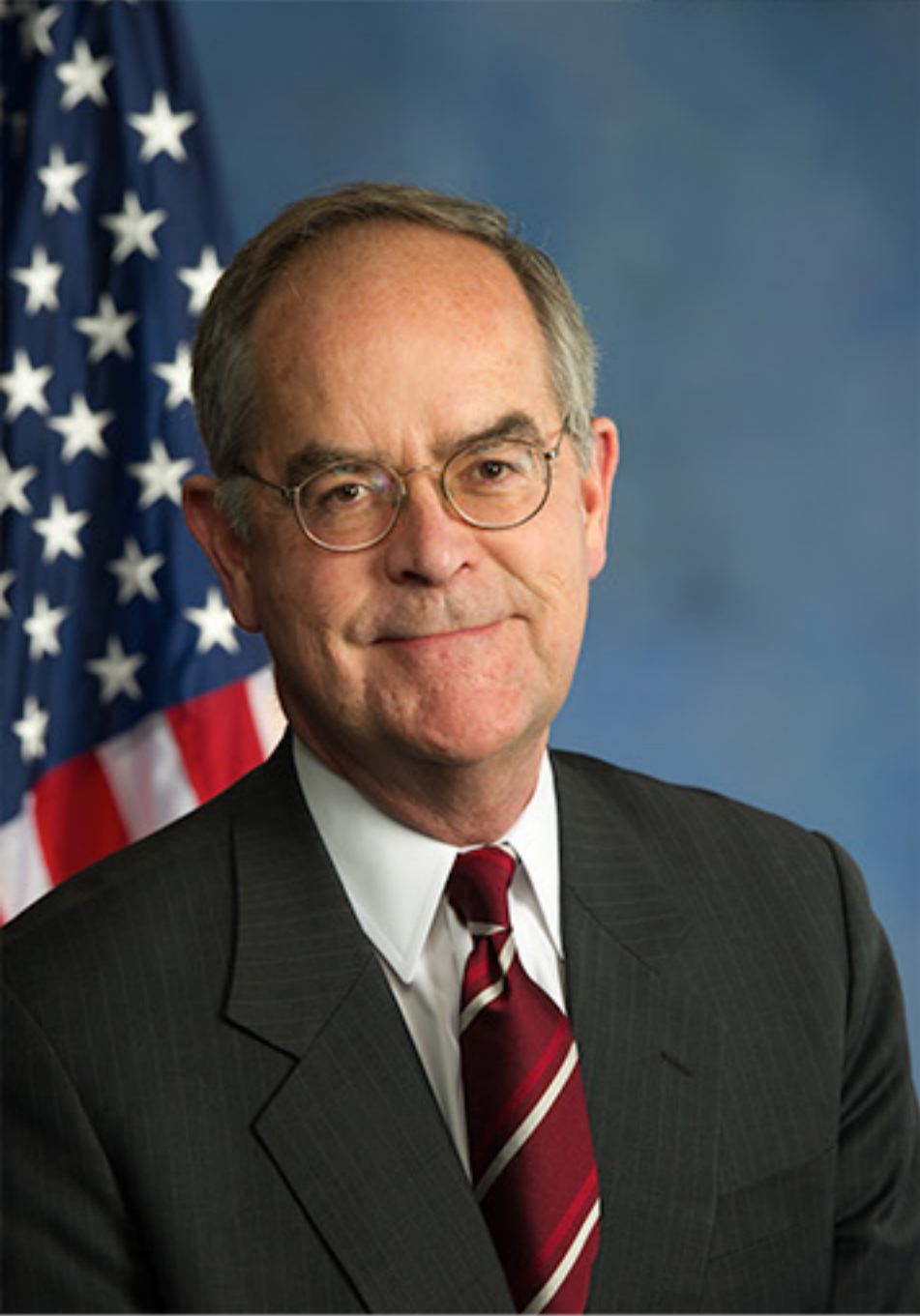
I turned to family photographs for my subject matter, pulling from a long history oddly to try and find myself.

This project had already had a first step taken in the form of two pieces, on the oval, a reaction in the speedway from the christmas bombing, and another much earlier work which was a cryptic dream of wall paper and ghosts from my baptism. I feel it appropriate to start with these though they were not a direct contribution to IP, however this project began before this year began, so it feels appropriate to show them here, a prototype first step to the final project itself:



The prototypes for this project, above untitled and below The Oval.
Both of these works helped me introduce the concept of home into my practice as a whole.





Family photos, (clockwise from top left.) My grandfather, riding Strollig Jim the walking horse, my grandfathers campaign office in Nashville, the King Farm My baptism, My father, tha mayro of nashville, My uncle, tennesees' acting congressman, my grandparents wedding, and Broadway St in Nashville



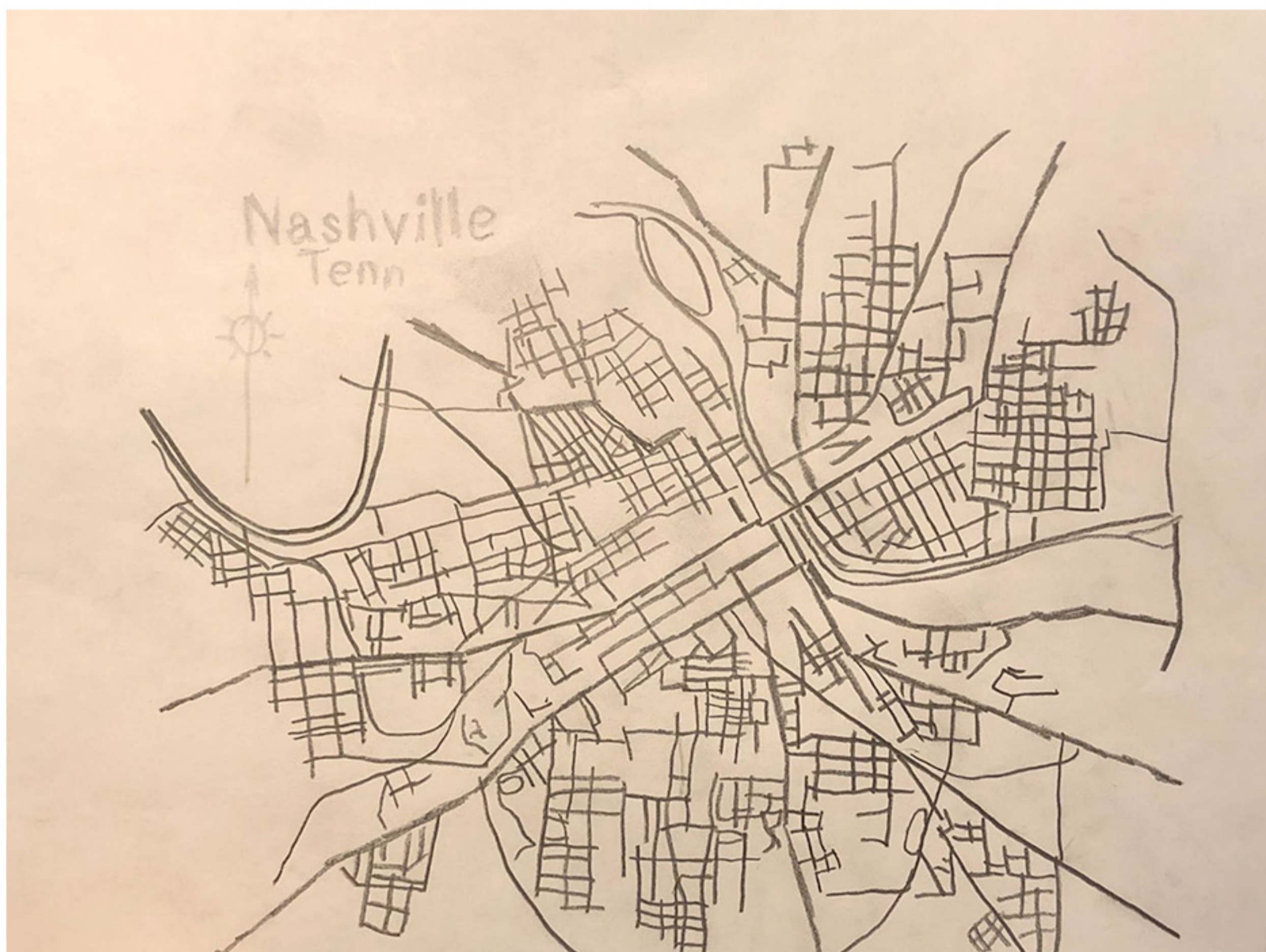
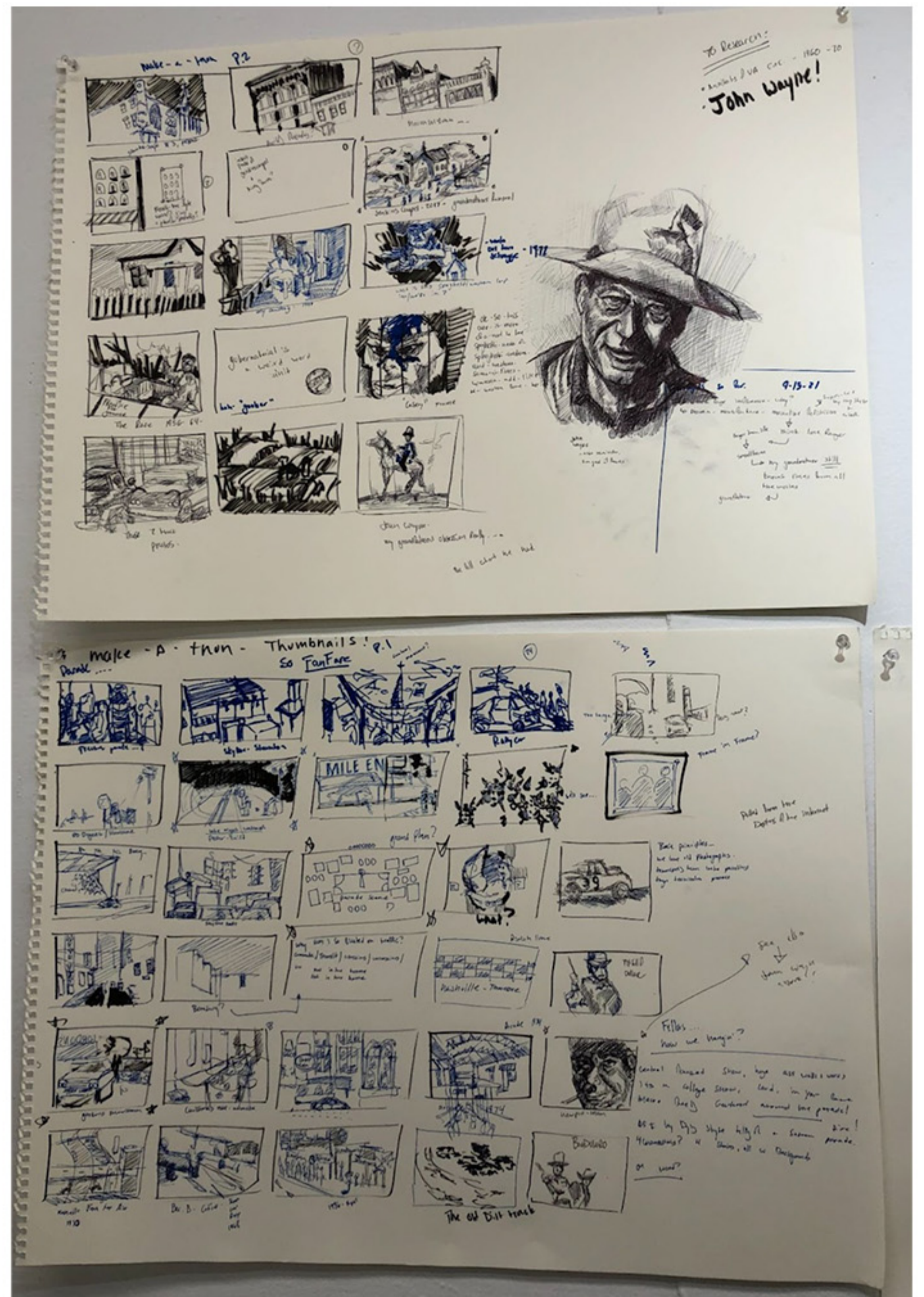
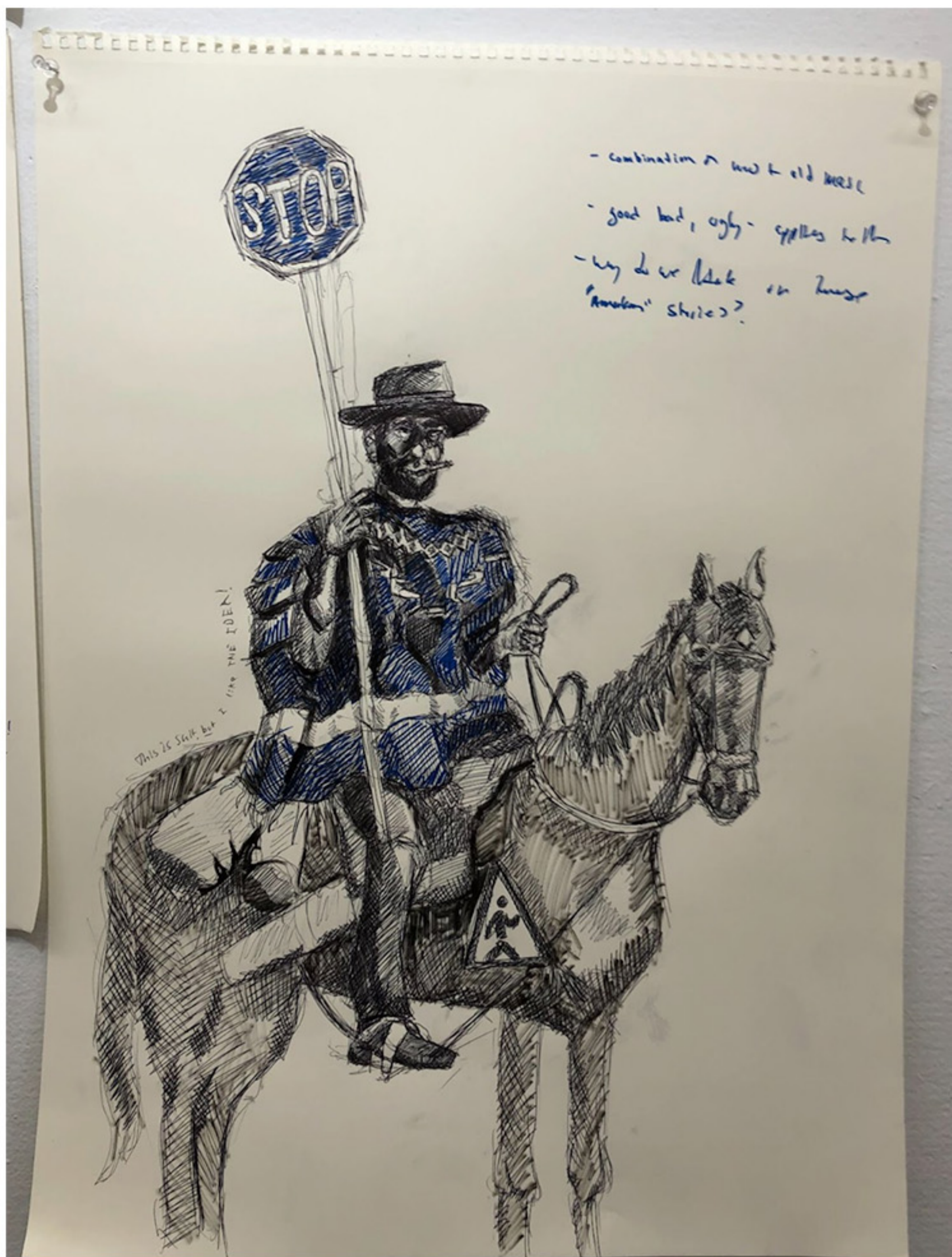
Assorted other family photographs from Shelbyville, TN and Staunton, Virginia. These were more preliminary but some went on to become unfinished prototype works.

Process interlude:

This project as with many things that take a year waas not without its love affairs, I had phases of map making, memorizing Nashville line for line until I could produce it from memory, as well as before even that a stint following around cowboys, and watching old movies, a sampling not only of the Southern Canon, but a love affair with fictional America.



Cowboy meditations:



Cowboys continued featuring memorized maps of Nashville and Shelbyville

Process Final Direction:

The painting part of things centered around that photograph from the summer, the man on the road all alone, which had sparked such a fervor of research, while not ultimately included he was a major catalyst for deep scouring of the idea of home.

However the further I progressed the more I remembered what I had learned in the maps, I was in love with line work, and networks themselves, the idea of showing these interconnected paths I had found throughout my searching. I revisited older works bearing the silhouettes of trees, and found in them a symbolic and timeless companion to the stories I wanted to tell.

That revisiting and the accompaniment of a book called the Overstory by Richard Powers broke open this block I had had revolving around central imagery, and so, this last February I started in earnest on the two panels that would become the focal points of *Bedford*.

The two panels themselves are representations of the two most difficult locations for me to grapple with, the first being the family cemetery, and Jenkins Chapel, the place I was baptized and perhaps where I will be buried. The Cooper side of the family itself has its heart in that ground so it felt appropriate to visit this place as a beginning for this project.

The second, my grandfather on Strolling Jim was the most uncomfortable to work with, he was the governor of Tennessee and part of the reason my family is so political in the first place, originally a figure of authority and mystery, dying when my father was ten. I felt with him the reason to show him is a reclamation of my own family history, as well as unraveling the mystery of such a man. If I could reclaim him somehow, me and do him justice in my own way, I was bringing myself to the family seat.

Finally the installation behind the two is a way to comfort myself, a cradle for these two difficult thoughts. The sycamore tree from outside my window in Nashville. Though the tree itself has died, I remember playing beneath it as my parents would tell me and my siblings the stories of our family, and in a way the tree was both an audience and a comfort, a rest for your back after a long day, or shade for my room in the summer. Such a member of the family I feel deserves to cradle these stories just as it cradled me as I heard them the first time

Process for the inception piece.





This 8 foot tall monstrosity from sophomore year was the catalyst for bringing trees back into the equation:



Process Panel #1



Process for Panel #2,



The final installation to save time used a projector to get the sycamore into the wall. Final hanging involved french cleating the two panels onto the wall later (with a possible surprise guest).





Final products Panels 1 and 2
2'x4' plywood





Conclusion: Personal

Bedford has been the hardest piece of work to make. Especially because it wasn't a technical issue, but an emotional one. I found myself often blocked simply because I was not at peace with my subject matter or felt unworthy to speak about my family through my work. I can say now looking back I am immensely proud of how this first step turned out, but I am also aware there is so much more I want to explore now that I've conquered the first step.

This project for me represents a much larger step into a body of work I see myself creating for the next several years, not only has all the research brought forward new questions but also I finally feel emotionally ready to take on the challenge of baring myself and my home in my practice.

Bedford is a first step, my answer to my original question of why my newfound obsession with where I am from, I reconnected with my network, and re integrated myself into a home I had run from for years. I am so thankful to my professors, Holly Hughes and Sophia Brueckner, as well as my GSI Kristina Sheufelt for their patience in helping me crack this egg open and make some work.

As always I am grateful to my family and my home, for giving me all the wonderful material I could ever ask for.

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